

Under The Jasmine Moon

Geri Rosenzweig



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For Mel and our three sons,
David, Niall and Paul; and
For Ojuri.

"We toe the line
between the tree in leaf and the bare tree."

SEPTEMBER SONG, Seamus Heaney

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HMS Press 1995.

Review by Patrick Holland Canadian Literature No. 145

Under The Jasmine Moon is about journeying, but where Eibel [previous review, same article] mainly profiles those who stay, travel and return, Geri Rosenzweig's is the confessional voice of an I, ferrying between Ireland and America, lyrically connecting one with the other, the present with past and future, youth with age. The diction and imagery is lush, but what might have become a surfeit of sensuousness is held in check in disciplined short-lined strophes. Travel in these linked lyrics, is personal, celebratory and elegiac in turn. Though the writer will not go back to live in Ireland, she knows that her hunger for its white cities / is a journey from which she'll never return : her childhood countryside drenches the poems in their images and figures.

Though Eibel is sparing with simile and explicit metaphor, while Rozensweig is prodigal of them, their work has in common a loving attention to craft, an expertise in taut formal practice, and dictional sureness. In one of the beautiful Jerusalem poems of *Under the Jasmine Moon*, the image (heard on TV) of Israelis as a people wrapped around each other in a small place gets its strength from foraging nature stanzas imaging the shoreline life of mussels as a nation,

*... mussels, pebbles, grains of sand,
a strand of seaweed and periwinkles*

*bound together
by tough threads spun from a gland
in the mussel's foot,*

*guy ropes by which
they attach themselves
to stones, or each other*

to survive the sea's buffeting.

Rosenzweig's poems, anchored in representative personal life, are adept at such imaginative leaps and connections, the very stuff of poetry.

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were originally published
in the following journals:

RED DANCE FLOOR

"THESE ARE THE DAYS"
"SHORT STORY"
"AN OLD MAN
WATCHES SWANS"

WEST HILLS REVIEW

"HER BLACK ANKLES"
"LAUREL HEDGE"

POET & CRITIC "HOME FROM THE DANCE"
NEGATIVE CAPABILITY "SNOW ON THE PATH"
REEPING BENT "COUNTERFEIT"
"THE QUINCE"

POET LORE

"CLOISTERS: NEW YORK"
"A FINE MUSIC"

HIRAM REVIEW "NOCTURNE"
VERSE "MILITARY CEMETERY:
JERUSALEM"

RESPONSE "GHAZALS: JERUSALEM
AT SUNSET"

INLET "A SOLAR WIND"
RIVERRUN "SMOKE-WISP OF LUST"
"SPARROW ON THE
THIRD RAIL"

POETIC JUSTICE "PERCH"
FLORIDA LITERARY "AFTER WORDS OF
FOUNDATION ADVICE"

PEGASUS REVIEW "THE WEATHER OF
ALL SOULS"

GREENSBORO REVIEW "THE CALF AND
THE MOON"

INTRODUCTION

In a way, an introduction to a collection of poems seems redundant. The impulse to write speaks for itself in the poems. I can only hope the reader will find something in them that speaks of the experiences we all share in life. Poems are moments captured like flies in a web, feelings put into words using language with a cadence and syntax we rarely use in our everyday language. The editor (Wayne Ray) asked how I came to use the images/metaphors found in my poems. Let me answer that with a quote by the scholar and translator of Celtic languages, Kuno Meyer. He said, "...to seek out and watch and love nature, in its tiniest phenomena as in its grandest, was given to no people so early and so fully as the Celt." Well, I am a Celt, born in a small town in the Irish Midlands. At the end of our vegetable garden, I could cross a small stream and enter the world of woods and fields, all the green, secret places that children love to nest in. Also, in school, we had to memorize the Early Irish Poetry. Here is an example of one poem written by an Irish monk sometime in the 7th century as he sat in his little cell, perhaps taking a break from the illuminated manuscript he was working on. It was obviously spring:

To me, that small poem, found in the margin of the manuscript, is close to Haiku in its precision and clarity. This is the kind of poetry I grew up with as a child. Later, it was Wordsworth, Keats, memorized in great chunks, sometimes forgotten, except for Keats' "Ode To Autumn". Also, I think this attentiveness to nature is not peculiar to the Irish, anyone who grew up in the country, the rural areas of their land, has that same watchfulness towards nature which Kuno Meyer speaks of, and because of how and where I grew up, metaphors/similes are just "out there" in nature, waiting to be plucked and linked up with seemingly unrelated events, ideas. They are a way of groping for words, a way to enlarge the world of language. It's fine to say, "I'm lonely" when you're talking with a friend, but in a poem, that's not going to fly. I think of an expression used all the time in Ireland to express loneliness; "lonely as the sound of a curlew." That simile broadens the language and deepens the meaning of the word, "loneliness". There is nothing more mournful than the cry of a curlew on a deserted beach, especially on a summer evening in Ireland. Poetry is a point of entry into the buried life of feelings, a retrieval system whereby the past is brought up and restored to the present. Often it's a word that haunts the ear and mind before it arrives on the tongue. That was how the poem, "The Quince" started. I heard the word, quince in my ear. The more I repeated it to myself, the more I thought of something bitter, but so what? The fruit is hard, sour and is processed into jams and jellies, with a large helping of sugar, before it becomes edible. Weeks went by, I couldn't get away from it, then one

day, lying in bed with a bad back, two lines 'wrote' themselves in my mind; "when I was young/under a jasmine moon." Suddenly the memories of the orchard I had robbed one moonlit night in my eighth year came flooding back; a magical place watched over by stern owners who knew every kid for miles around plotted to rob them of the apples, pears, plums in that glimmering garden. For me, it was the quince, dazzling, golden on its black branch. I imagined it as a soft, juicy sort of apple. Perhaps that first subversive act of "breaking and entering", the kicking against all the "Thou Shalt Nots" hammered into me by parents and nuns, was my first poem! I do know that in writing it, I felt the old fear and excitement, heard the strange sounds of the orchard in the dark, and then, the terrible shock of the fruit, bitter on my tongue. Ah Life! The O sounds in the words, "young", "moon", "tongue", echo the darkness, the longing to taste the forbidden. In the first drafts, I typed it up in two-line stanzas; later when I tried three-line stanzas, I was pleased with the pause between line three and four, I feel that slight pause describes the stealth, the hesitation between "slipping the bolt" and actually opening the gate. I don't want to overload the poem with too much significance, but the image of the "First Garden" with its forbidden fruit, etched in the collective unconscious, and how knowledge can be hard and bitter, pleased me after the poem was finished. Poetry as revelation of the self to the self. In 1960, I emigrated to America and like any exile, I constantly looked back, hankering after what I left behind, sometimes forgetting the reasons that made me come to America. In "The Calf and The Moon", the impulse for the poem came from a question someone asked me when I was in Ireland on vacation: They said, "Would you ever come back to Ireland to live?" Of course, the answer was, "no". Later, I thought of the biblical story of the Prodigal. I suppose the poem is an answer to that question. I am the Prodigal daughter who "won't return to my mother's house." Now I had said it! Feelings into words, nailed down on the blank page! As in the poem, "These are the Days", this poem is a coming to terms with the past. I feel the I and K sounds in "dark as a cricket" have the feeling of quickness, light heartedness associated with youth, the beginning of a journey. The image of the calf, in section two, comes from childhood summers spent on my uncle's farm. It was there I first saw a brown and white calf suckling on the teat, and when it was time for me to leave, I actually "rubbed the wooly knobs of her horns goodbye." Having the calf live on in the poem reaffirms the line, "I won't return to my mother's house." In section three, the long O sounds in "moon" "shadow" "song" have a kind of finality about them which I hope speaks in this poem. I think the moon, in its journeys round the earth, describes my restlessness, my longing to keep moving. Let me end this brief introduction with a little story. Finn MacCool, legendary Irish hero was asked, "What is poetry?" His answer was, "Poetry is being close to the music of what happens." The experience of the poem, the pleasure in its sounds, syntax, rhythm, for reader and writer, is a blundering after "the music of what happens".

THE PERSISTENCE OF RIVERS

In the still pool above the weir,
anchored to her reflection,
the swan of my eighth year
 is the core of light on dark water
holding my eye; the left sleeve
 of my cardigan unravels.
Farewell is a word with no meaning
 in this snapshot
where I'm the apple of father's eye.

What has cast off the stitches
 in my green sleeve?
With the persistence of rivers
 my right hand plucks
the tight stitches of home,
 its pastures and pear orchards,
though I still play with dolls,
 tent under the kitchen table,
listening to voices:
 her father would give her the moon.

Later, I'll hunt the moon
 on the rivers of summer,
a boy's hand cupping my breast
 and mother's voice will begin
its nightly task
 of pulling words from my dreams.

But for now, it's dolls,
 pictures of the American West
torn from magazines, pinned to my bedroom wall
 and simple squares I learn to knit
in school; when I drop stitches, the nun's cane
 hisses across the back of my hand.

Leave, the verb of longing
 starts to chant in the winds
of November and Quest,
 a new word, billows like a green sail
in flames of peat fires
 father builds with care each morning.

Stillness of my face in a snapshot,
my sleeve unraveling
in an Irish town where roads
fly between avenues of oak and alder.
Quickness of my fingers
picking at threads until Venture forth
becomes a phrase to utter
over and over like a dreamer
walking on water
as rain pelts the windows
and homework's the tracing
of Ireland's map on transparent paper;
my blue pencil wavers
along the eastern coast
where the vowels exile
repeat themselves in the long, curling waves.

Little mother of years
standing watch by the river,
I have carried you through doors
where the word exit
burned a sign on your forehead.
I have purled swans,
dark cables of rivers into new sweaters.
In my landscape of maple and pine,
I blaze with the core of your being,
a beating of wings above the weir.

HOME FROM THE DANCE

It was always three in the morning,
my mouth a blur of lipstick

in the light of the front hall.
It was always mother's voice,

"who's there?" knowing
it was her youngest daughter

home from the dance,
a boy's hand down the front of my blouse.

She'd sink back on the feather pillow,
remembering her own days

of slipping out to dances,
a boy's arm tight as a whip

round her waist
as they foxtrotted

under the slowly revolving ball
of red and blue light.

Later, in the dark street
outside Grandmother's door,

his face in her auburn hair.
It was always the old line next morning,

dancing soon comes to an end,
but who believed her

as she fixed paper patterns
to silk print, my new summer dress,

hummed an old waltz under her breath,
her mouth full of pins.

SNOW ON THE PATH

Something is taking my mother
from the world; she calls it light.

Last year it slipped a white
hook to her mind to capture

words near the tip of her tongue.
Lately it wakes her before dawn,

cradles her thin body along
paths of wildflowers in Irish

fields covered years ago
with asphalt; if there's snow

on the path, she wears the green
wool coat she loved at nineteen.

But the air is mild, she's happy,
her father is alive, her mother

smiles beneath the trees' frosty
branches; when it seems as if a river

of light fills her bones
and she could float away

in the wind, she forces herself
to leave the wide bed and go

down to the emptiness
of her kitchen where she brews

tea, listens for the screak
of the iron gate, the chink

of milk bottles delivered
to her red-tiled doorstep.

LAUREL HEDGE

...for my father (1903-1968)

They're cutting down your hedge,
your deep, laurel hedge.

Leaves curl on the grass
like stiff, leather pouches.

Where the chain-saw bites through,
the wood's not white, as I thought

but dark and lined
as the palms of your hands.

Mother gathers it for kindling
while the woodthrush

whose home they pull down
hops into the cinquefoil bush.

Father, from your house
of yellow flowers

watch the saw's pointed teeth
glint deep in the hedge,

wait for the smoke to rise
blue in the chimney tonight

while a fine rain enters
the place where your laurel grew.

THESE ARE THE DAYS

I.

These are the days
of the wasp's late dance
in the flowers of Sweet Everlasting.

I have come back to my house of light
after weeks in Ireland
where red berries hang in wet hedges.

The Irish are like a hawbush
my friend said; gnarled,
thorny, we hug our past

the way a hawberry grips
its dark stone, our music's a cry
in the sneaping wind, our words

short straws in a tight fist;
fly back to your maples,
keep their roots deeply watered.

II.

These are the days
I breathe the reflective air
of Autumn in America.

I have returned from my father's house
where the floorboards creaked.
Rain glazed the windows,

his absence filled small rooms.
In the hall, mother's
footsteps were muffled,

her breath short,
a frayed string played out:
"would you live here again?"

III.

The stones are falling
in the heart-shaped harbor,
the garden is bare of four apple trees,

the laurel's cut down
to a stump and the plough rises
like a hammer in the Irish sky.

IV.

These are the days
of rich October!
earth's brown body

seeded with peppery bulbs
of tulip, hyacinth, crocus.
Deer crossing the hill at night

stamp my raked beds
with the small hearts
of their hoofprints.

My slender maples
grip dark loam
while their new

coral crowns burn
through a scrim of early mist;
I keep their roots well-watered.

HER BLACK ANKLES

Lovely the flat-topped acacias
slicing the African horizon

but I'll never rest in their shade
knowing the silky eyes

of the gazelle are on me.
Nor will I see the little ears

of the hippo, twitching
when she rises from her mud bath

or the cloud of elephants drifting
down to the water-hole at dusk.

I'd turn away from fabulous animals
to wander hot streets of an African town

crying out the ancient name of my friend,
Ojuri: Ojuri, are you still in the world?

When dawn floods the Kalahari,
Lord: you feel like the first woman

I won't stand in that light
for I might find that the African

earth has taken my friend,
that she no longer moves in the flowing

landscape, the hem of her blue dashiki
fluttering round her black ankles.

COUNTERFEIT

November is grief
for the world's light
seeping away

to a rusty stain
on hills, ribbed fields,
bark of trees,

counterfeit
of the bronze glow
our pennies of desire

cast on water splashing
in the green bowls
of July's fountains,

the coppery hoard
the catbird stored
in its undertail coverts

though it mewled poor
all summer
in its plush acre.

THE QUINCE

When I was young
under a jasmine moon,
I slipped the bolt

on our neighbour's gate,
stole the quince
from its crooked branch.

Her orchard gave up
its sounds,
leaves, small animals
rustling in the dark,
a song composed for no one
under the jasmine moon

and I could almost
taste the sun on my tongue
the way that quince glowed in my hand.

When I slip the bolt
to stand in the last,
rustling dark

and a voice, sharp as a twig
snapping underfoot, asks:
what have you learned?

I shall answer:
Even now, I feel the shock
of that quince, its hard

acrid flesh on my tongue
when I was young
under a jasmine moon.

CLOISTERS: NEW YORK

Let the deep, shining leaves,
the dazed yellow fruit
of the garden's trees

slowly burn on the smoking altar
of October, while the Hudson, pouring
past the Palisades, abandons

the blue, wrinkled
depths of itself to the sea.
Let small birds, flickering

like sparks among the leaves
destroy with lethal beaks
the golden quince

and the field mouse, faltering
on three legs, close its eye
in the last gleam of motherwort.

In wind and light
watch their lives
grow faint as the fragrance

of herbs surrounding the trees;
meadowsweet, mullein,
Dyer's greenweed, clove.

They're leaving the rustling
sanctuaries of their names
while you sit on a stone bench,

knowing you won't go like these lives,
patient, rapturous
as saints in the fire.

MOURNERS IN THE SNOW

Snow blunts the angles
of mourners huddled
under dark umbrellas,

blurs the mound
of earth waiting
like a shadow.

Having lives to spare,
flakes hurry
into the black hole

before pine box
and first small
rain of earth,

before the hot-house
coral roses sail
from a harbor

of gloved hands
into flakes swirling
like a dream of plenty.

THE MAN WHO CURSED DREAMS

Down from the hills into your field
drifts the wolf-maiden.

She lifts a latch;
the gate deep in your dream
swings open on its shining hinges.
In her black muzzle

she bears the thick pelt
woven for you

on the night you cursed dreams,
said they were worse

than wolves in a sheepfold.
Her nails are stars,

Her coat glitters like rough grass
as she sends her low call

into the night.
You slip from a wide bed

to follow her tracks over deep snow
into a moonlit interior

where earth sings its secrets
under your feet

and sheep graze in a sacred landscape.

NUN IN MY TREE

The house is a shell
of winter light
and just now,

the red fox
drifting over snowy fields.
Without trying,

I am a rich woman!
But all morning, the crow
whets its beak in the maple

and the lesson
a nun beat into me in third grade
with her wooden cross

calls from the blood:
Master, what must I do
to be saved?

The crow's weight
bends the branch.
Sell all you have,

Give it to the poor
And follow me.
I wait for the bird to lift

its darkness from my tree -
at last, the branch
springs free.

THE COVE'S DEEP HEART

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
That the small rain down shall rain?
Christ! that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again

Anonymous

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
Quicken once more the cove's flow
Where the heron hunches,
Blue, in the shallows
And boats wait on stems of anchors.

That the small rain down shall rain?
Lift its melic voice again
In the cove's deep heart
Where no birds rustle and sing
In the reeds' tall dwelling,

Christ! that my love were in my arms
When spring's sunset swarms
Like salmon in a sea-blue sky;
We'd drowse on our feather bed,
Redstarts flaring at the window ledge,

And I in my bed again
With the rough raven's wing
Of his hair on my breast
As dawn rises like a note
From the heron's plumed throat.

NOCTURNE

My fire slows
to white ash.
Through woods and windy
fields, deer bound, flicking
their white tails to the moon.
Out in the world,

my children furnish
houses with new beds:

just so
just so
ticks the clock's thin finger.

I rake the fire.
In a year of sickness
I would like

to step
out of my body
and enter the sea's

long, silver roar.
Tonight, the wind
is a scythe reaping
smoke off the waves.

I could be
weightless and quick,
shimmering, easily breathing

with other bright lives
deep in that blue mansion.

RX: MAGNETIC RESONANCE IMAGING

In a starched lab coat, God grins
through his red beard;
there's a mirror overhead, my dear
to give an illusion of space.

With clicks and whirrs,
he slides me into his pod.
The mirror is a joke, it gives me
an image of terror, my eyes are black stars.

I listen to him whistling at a console of keys;
you'll hear a knocking sound, my dear,
lie perfectly still!

I hear the sound of a hammer tapping on wood.
My spine flashes on a screen,
cross-section of a rare tree
he's been searching the hazy nebulas for.
But louder, the blood beating in my ears -
Octavio Paz is right, this is the sound
of the soul's footsteps -

How lovely she is, my soul.
A woman on her way to her lover,
tight buds of her wings opening
as she hurries into blue distances.

BEAUTIFUL AS LAZULI

We've been invited here.

Albert Einstein

Some believe in a formula
beautiful as lazuli
beneath the mystery.

They sing of the atom's dance -
our countryside
neither green nor solid,

though it takes father and friend,
teaching us
the art of the end.

Clear nights, tired of counting coins,
we gather on hilltops, peer
through crude instruments while deer

whistle to each other in the meadows
and the past, starred isthmus,
floats above us.

Atoms finely tuned
as lovers in a saraband,
we watch the sky,

remembering the one who said
we've been invited here,
how he's gone elsewhere,

bright enzyme
on the track
of a new theorem.

AN OLD CAMEO

Hemisphere with sickle strand,
small horses cantering in the foam,
rim of a new moon in the east.
Suddenly, like the lock of this old
cameo which sprung open at my touch,
comes the plucked note of the Koto,
real as the vision of a Japanese
courtesan riding out from Kyoto.
The glossy wing of her hair
shades her face as she leans
down from her white pony
to gather the auburn
rustle of chrysanthemums
I have placed in a rib
of driftwood lying on the shore.
Then, as through a mist,
the fluting cries of the cranes,
white, slender women, dancing
into my field, brushing my body
with their shining wings.

PATCHES OF SUMMER

In a black sweatshirt
with yellow bands on the shoulders,

she pushes away from the rim
of the pond, from dark trees.

Leaning into the weather of solstice,
she glides over the deep,

green shadow of water under ice
on blades fine as the edge of a knife.

I stand on iron-cold ground
while she circles a frozen planet

to the song of her skates, whirling
closer and closer to the empty center

from which she begins a figure eight.
Perfectly balanced on the cusp

of one blade, slowly she crosses
the midpoint of a curve,

a woman at solstice, bearing
patches of summer on her shoulders.

HEBREW LESSONS

Open the gate of Aleph.
Your pen is a plow, drawing
furrows of Hebrew characters
from a right margin.

Plant vowel-seeds
between consonants, they sprout
like wildflowers stippling a meadow.

Perfect the verb to love,
tuck the vowel in a different groove,
the word flares like a burning bush;
love becomes lust.

Chant the paradigm of possession,
of mine of yours of hers,
now your voice is the sound of rain
in Jerusalem's olive groves.

Conjugate verbs, it's the clatter
of gravel beneath the hoofs
of Ibex in En-Gedi.

Remember parts of the body
that come in pairs are feminine,
but belly is also feminine;

Thy belly is like a heap of wheat
set about with lilies.
Begin the Aleph Bet again
this time in script.

Lamed is a willowy reed,
Ayin, a little fish,
Tav is two posts and a lintel,
the house where you write for the first time,
Boaz in the field.

An eastern wind rises from the page.
Your pen swings from right to left.

Ruth's sickle
in the ancient wheat.

MILITARY CEMETERY: JERUSALEM

...for a young widow

On Mount Herzl
her wedding band flashes

in the morning light.
Beneath a veil

her hair gleams like the Negev.
Like desert swifts,

her hands pluck weeds
from his grassy mound,

turn the pot of cactus
flowering at his headstone

while deep in her courtyard
the pomegranate ripens

and the flame of the cypress
brushes her wall.

Her veil is a Psalm
of grief, the song

of her days without salt,
salt of his body

in the hot afternoons
of Jerusalem.

GHAZALS: JERUSALEM AT SUNSET

...for David

I.

Listen, in the wind rising from the Kidron Valley
you can hear her Jebusite name, Y'Vus Y'Vus.

We say we feel at home here; does that mean
we were once lost? whose face slips over mine?

Shalom at the Wall, but in the shadows of the black hats
I may not kiss you on the Sabbath.

Pomegranate trees sway in white courtyards;
red-haired women dreaming of Solomon.

The wind is a dark mouth now, blowing salt
from the pilgrim's hand at the Jaffa Gate.

II.

If the wind is a dark mouth, it's also honey on the lips
of Jews kissing mezuzahs in small doorways.

In the Souq at sunset, the silence is louder than
hundreds of aluminum shutters crashing down at noon.

Only in this City, when a low arch stuns me,
is the pain called, gift, blessing.

Swirling like dust in the alleys, the prayers
of her lovers, each chanting in their different quarters.

Outside the Mosque, old mens' sandals wait like frail
boats the young step into; everywhere, it's the same.

III.

When bead curtains clicked in the Souq at noon,
I heard another of her names, al-Quds al-Quds.

Wind in the olive trees is intimate as the rain
ticking on the windows of houses in Ireland.

Someone plants a flower in the barrel of her gun.
The young girl spins round; blue flare of her dress.

The soldier on the rooftop, look! his hand cupped
on its dome as if on a woman's breast.

Jerusalem: fruited tree in fabled embroiderries
of stone hills, star-seed on every tongue.

BETWEEN ME AND THE HASID: JERUSALEM

It's the coat,
the long, black coat
of the priest who touched
my six-year old body in a dark parlor.

It's the stockings,
the thick, woolen stockings
of the nun who smacked my face,
sprinkled me with holy water.

It's the side-ringlets,
the glossy curls
I cut in my eighth year
with a blunt scissor.

And as he passes,
it's the shirt,
the white gleam of my father's shirt
on its hook in the bathroom
the morning he died in Ireland.

ORPAH'S SONG OF RUTH

and they took them wives
of the women of Moab:
the name of the one was Orpah,
and the name of the other Ruth;

The Book of Ruth

I was the slim thong binding
her red braids; they flashed
like staves in the music
begun on the road to Bethlehem.

I was her shadow lengthening
on the stones all morning
and the broken song in the
loose clasp of her sandal.

I was the fold in her shawl
dust hurried into as wind
whipped down from the highlands
and night erased the plain.

I was a small scar, round as
a moon in her palm; I grew dark
as she sped toward Boaz striding
with the sun through his fields.

I was the willow basket
shuttling like a dream
of doubt between her
left hip and her right.

I was the splinter bedded
in the tip of her finger,
the cry of pain when
she plucked me out

I was two lines in the song,
the ordinary part of her
who turned back to dwell among
the little hearth-gods in Moab.

WILD PLUM TREE

How many winters
have I called to him
from the snowy silence of his field.

Busy as the air braiding smoke
from his chimney each night,
he won't give me a thought,

tending his new wife
in their bed's silken pastures,
until in a dream of wild blue plums

he stumbles from the house
this spring night
and into my thorns.

Under the hooded stars
his scythe sings
in my brambly thickets.

My roots stir
like small hands
when he finds the way

to my lithe, dark bole.
By morning, I'm honed,
taut as a tuning fork

the wind plays on,
his dryad wife
his wild plum.

SOLAR WIND

In April the surgeon's
eyebrows twitch like sparrows
on the budded maple:

it must come out
my dear, the walls are
lined with fibroids.

I float into space
counting ten nine eight...

My body opens,
luminous vellum
beneath their hot lights.

They read
the ancient text
of my arteries.

My veins flow
like blue prophecies
when they slip their gloved hands
into my body,

raise my womb
into sterile air

while out among cold stars
I drift, an empty planet
in the solar wind.

THINKING OF OSIP MANDELSTAM ON A SPRING MORNING IN 1990

I'll hurry
to my seat
in the lilac sleigh of the dead.

Osip Mandelstam
Voronezh. 6-10 January 1937

Mandelstam, wake up from your trance
in the lilac seat of the dead.

The season is a latch
lifted on a rusty gate.

The plough, patient as a shadow
on the earth, waits for your hands

to invent the furrows, broadcast
the seeds, harvest vowels rich,

dark as the bread which coaxed
fear from the ribbed roof of your mouth.

Listen! your hero the bullfinch
flicks black wings,

cocks his head, sings
in the grass steppes of Voronezh.

Osip,
brush the snow from your eyes,

in the big light of morning
step up to your plough.

THIS MOMENT IS SO BRIEF
...for my husband

Dark blue clusters
dot the floor of the sea.
To raise one

is to discover a nation
of mussels, pebbles, grains of sand,
a strand of seaweed and periwinkles

bound together
by tough threads spun from a gland
in the mussel's ancient foot,

guy ropes by which
they attach themselves
to stones, or each other

to survive the sea's buffeting.
None are alike: this one
in the palm of my hand

sprouts a pale green frond
of seaweed, its pebbled walls
are rose-colored as Jerusalem's

where a young girl
read her poems on TV: We Israelis,
wrapped around each other in a small place...

In the afternoon light,
your word, symbiosis,
is a rush of seawater on the tongue,

a salty loneliness
swirling in the shell of the ear
as I lower a knot of life

into the water where it drifts,
settles on the ribbed floor of the sea.
Among the other nations,

a lamp set upon a hill.

THE ANIMALS SHE'S NEVER SEEN

Reading of grandmothers
scaring off bears
in the American wilderness -
one hollers, Git! Git!
and the bear turns,
crashes back into the forest -

my mother, startling tonight
at the dog's low growl,
flicks on terrace lights
to find a skunk parading its tail
up to our glass doors.

In her seventies,
at the end of a summer visit,
my mother kneels on rough, kitchen tiles
softly calling,
ah look, its paws
little, black gloves.

Under the moth-ringed lights,
she and the animal
take a long look at each other
before it waddles away into the bushes -

Imagine, I've never seen
the stoat or badger
though Ireland's full of them!

Helping her to her feet
I gaze into her green eyes
this summer night:

the animals she's never seen
stare back at me
from secret, rustling places
of Irish alder, oak and rowan.

PERCH

Down the path's symmetry
soft tick of my bike.
Rust-streak of a thrush

startled out of the brush.
The brain in its dreamy circling
senses its way to a river's stillness.

My hands touch water,
cupped under a perch
nosing the shallows.

He hangs, a brindled bolt
between my palms,
black stripes,

spiny fin
defined in my shadow
cast on the water.

I know again
the fluid surge of his body
as he darts deep

into the river,
scrape of his fin
sharp on the skin.

SHORT STORY

...for Miss Birmingham

Witch of my childhood
with a red hen in the yard,
hardly a day goes by when I don't think of you,

or your neighbours, the craw-thumpers
my parents called them,
off to mass and communion
each morning, tongues swinging like
picks against you

as you held your ground, refused them
use of your yard as a short cut to the street.
I was deep into the sweetness of a Saturday

morning in childhood, school and homework
thrown in a corner, toeing the line
in a game of hopscotch

when you hurried up the road,
black coat flapping,
a basket of vegetables on your arm.
Biddy Birmingham, Crazy Biddy!

I sang under my breath as I hopped
through the chalked squares;
suddenly, doors flew open

and your neighbours were on you, taunting
you with the name I had whispered, flinging
your basket to the ground.

My feet stuck to the sidewalk
until mother pulled me indoors,
but not before I heard a strange cry fill the air;
Biddy, it was your voice,
drawing down a curse on all of them,
your wrinkled arms raised to the sky,

your hair flying like smoke.
Was it chance that soon after
one father dropped dead on his doorstep,

another was taken to bed
to lie stiff as wood for years;
marriages unraveled; sons took to drink?

Biddy, hardly a day goes by
when I don't think of you,
picking tomatoes and onions off the road,
your curse beginning its work

on the threads of their lives
and I, unsure to this day if its power
didn't snap some shining band of my life.

AN OLD MAN WATCHES SWANS: LOUGH REE, IRELAND

Cutting the motor,
I drift close to Nuns' Island.
The pen is restless on her rough nest.
Her wing is a wimple flashing in the reeds.

The cob struts back and forth, picking
up small stones in his beak, tossing
them aside until he uncovers a strip of sand
running down to the water's edge.

I rest on the oars.
Sun warms my back.
I think of my fifteen children
out on the blue roads of the world.

The fields they played in
are burnished with coltsfoot.
Blackcapped terns that announced
their arrivals and departures

skim the lake for damselfly.
Their cries pierce the mild air of May
as the pen rises from the nest,
cygnets tumbling round her black legs.

She leads on the narrow
path the old cob's cleared
for all of them
down to dark waters.

Almost evening
when I start for home.
The oars rise and fall over the lake's sheen.
Is it the light fooling an old man,

or is my stroke steady,
swift as when I was twenty
and lifting the summer skirts of my bride
in the house I built for us by Lough Ree.

SMOKE-WISP OF LUST

Old woman, her sex gone to sleep,
my angel fern thrives on shade & dust
above the stair that grows more steep.

Nervous cobweb of light in a deep
pot, even the wire stand's pocked with rust,
like an old woman, her sex gone to sleep.

My son watered it once from a cup I keep
handy & came down, flecked with green must
from above the stair that grows too steep

for my breath, my heart's need to reap
its harvest of new lessons, adjust, adjust,
old woman with your sex gone to sleep.

Angel fern in my dark corner, neap
tide of my life & smoke-wisp of lust
above the stair that grows more steep,

today, patient on hands & knees I creep
to your thirsty frond that won't adjust.
Old woman, with my sex gone to sleep,
I cheat the stair that grows more steep.

SUMMER PRINT

His cool scan
of my body from ankle to breast
shocks, until I realise
that from this distance

I look young
in a summer print,
the room's pink light. Or perhaps
he knows I could be his mother

and plays with the thought of return
to the warm, loamy body
from which he sprouted,
slick as a beetroot
into the quick hands of the midwife,
her booming laugh,
no going back now child!

as she delivered
the stinging smack
that made him
bawl for his life
then briskly swaddled him
in flannel:

he's about twenty-five,
with long thighs,
black glittery eyes.

A FINE MUSIC

Each August I wrestle
with my mad angel
who rows out in a longboat
to where shadows of pines
darken the river.
She babbles that death
might be cool rooms
on summer nights;
I pinch her hard, remind her
those are words
she read in a book,
for all we know, the dead
work hard, rubbing
their white bones
in summer's moonlit fields till dawn.
When she weeps for the dog
racing in the red bracken,
scenting twig and bush
as if he's sure of return,
I shout, enough!
march her down to the river,
set her boat on fire.
While flames eat the wood
and smoke swallows
the flame, I whisper
in her satin ear,
this is death, mad angel,
so act as if August
is the loveliest month
and the shrill of cicadas
a fine music.

ON THE THIRD RAIL

Screeching like a fishwife
she drops the crust, flies at a rival,
claws raking his breast.

When it's over,
she scrapes her beak on the third rail
even as the train glides in;

not for her the willow's cool bower,
she darts to a crack in the wall
next to the track,

hangs there, wings flared,
a knot of ferocity
with a filthy crust stuck in her beak -

I want to begin on the stone platform
of a station in Ireland, tense in new feathers,
hungry by the tracks' black glitter.

AFTER WORDS OF ADVICE

...for my sons

If I could,
I'd pull you in again like three kites
from Manhattan, Syracuse, Los Angeles

to stand and watch with me
the swallowtail moving like a woman
through the white rooms of the phlox,

the deep sleeves
of her yellow kimono
fluttering at the sills

as she quietly shuts the windows
of her summer pavilion
this last day of August.

SHE LIVES THE LIFE

Having survived the pinch
from the parent plant
in Ireland, the journey

to New York wrapped in foil
in the dark of my pocket,
the cutting claims life

from the light of my window,
puts forth cerise blooms
I glimpsed in deep-silled windows

of whitewashed houses
over there, and more,
behind the tuck and frill

of one lace-curtained window,
a woman bathing her infant
in a kitchen

bright as a clock's face,
quiet as a cat's paw;
she lives the life

I choose not to love
under her rustling thatch
as all morning

the leaves of my maple
turn in the wind; a woman
glancing back for a last look.

THE WEATHER OF ALL SOULS'

My father leans toward me
in the wind,

raising his voice
only to sing sad Irish songs.

He's eloquent now
in November's weather,

bending over me, brushing
my face with rain

to say he has finished
with earth and bone.

Listen, he tells me,
turning up the collar of my coat

as though I'm still a child,
when the soul

creeps from the body's dark
it remembers the music

that shaped its many miles.
Keening, my father leans toward me,

nothing between us
but the weather of all souls.

ACOLYTE

You live among things that will not stay.
An Irish hedge of deep, slick laurels,
the wren's Autumn cry of don't delay!

Acolyte at the mind's altar, you pray
and heap it with the brambles of what was,
devout among things that will not stay;

the canticle of peat fires on a fall day,
the rain's plainchant in wet larches,
the wren's counterpoint of don't delay!

Listen, the laurel's cut down to gray
stumps, the fireplace is mute with ash.
Leave the things that will not stay,

enter April's bitter winds that flay
the new magnolia's fleshy blossoms.
Thank the wren for crying, don't delay!

Exile's flawed, but going back is worse,
stranger in your own land, an empty purse.
Wrens crying in Autumn, don't delay!
know the end in things that will not stay.

THE CALF AND THE MOON

I.

Dark as a cricket
I enter the white city by the sea.
Young men, lounging in the dunes, leap
to the music of my prodigal pockets.

Oh their golden tongues!
Their hands, light, quick on my thighs
and at night, the little song of my heels
ticking on the cobbled streets.

II.

A solitary cricket
composes her song
in the thickets of night.
The moon, hunting in the hills

of the sea, offers me
the lovely shadow of her hand.
She knows my hunger for white cities
is a journey from which I'll never return.

III.

Autumn hisses in the dunes. I stand
in the ruin of my clothes, tossing my last coin.
I won't return to my mother's house,
to my sister who sweeps with a sullen broom.

The family will grow old without me,
the precious ring go out like a lamp in the window,
the road dive back under grass,
the eager knife grow blunt

on its peg by the door
that the brown and white calf may live on.
I still see her, tugging on the teat
the morning I ran away;

when I rubbed the wooly knobs of her horns goodbye
in the field's flowing light,
she lifted her face to me,
her dark lips stippled with milk.